

# **Frequency of Visits of Children in Out-Of-Home and Their Permanency**

**Terri Alderman**

**University of Kentucky**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study evaluated the importance of the frequency of visits for foster children as they relate to their permanency goal. A program evaluation was conducted through a records review in the Gateway Buffalo Trace Region. The purpose of visits for children in out-of-home care is to work towards reunification with birth parents when possible. If reunification cannot be established then adoption should be looked at as the next best alternative. Every child deserves a safe and permanent home and without successful frequent visits the permanency process is hindered. Visits between birth parents and their children in foster care is the topic of interest to those who work in the social work field because social workers increasingly recognize the significance to reunification of the establishment of visits early in placement. The purpose of the study is to examine whether frequent visitation between a child in foster care and their birth parents will promote reunification/permanency for the child(ren) in care.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Each year thousands of children are placed in foster homes with the intention of returning them to their family's care in a short time. A large proportion of these children come from families where major problems such as illness, substance abuse, criminal activity, and lack of adequate housing exist, and where the parents lack even the most basic parenting skills (Fanshel, 1992). Federal statutes require that agencies make an effort to facilitate reunification of placed children with their families whenever possible (Adoption

Assistance Act, 1980), and available research has demonstrated a positive correlation between continued contact with the parent during placement and both the adjustment of the child to the foster home and the probability of being returned home (Weinstein, 1990). The question to be asked is whether the type of visits and frequency of visits have a direct relationship to the reunification of foster children and their birth parents and the overall permanency goal of children in care.

Visits between foster children and birth parents often involve considerable stress for all parties – foster child, biological parents, and foster parents. Foster children often feel a conflict of loyalties between the biological parents and their foster parents, and react in an angry and confused manner during and after visits (Gean, 1995). Fanshel (1992) found that during visits many parents engaged in inappropriate behavior reflecting their negative feelings about the placement. A high degree of tension and competitiveness often exists between the foster parents and the biological parents. Lacking an appreciation of the importance of the biological parents in the child's life, foster parents may frustrate and discourage visiting by the biological parents. Indeed, the continued stress of visiting may contribute to the breakdown of the placement.

It is clear, however that one of the most fundamental skills required of state child protection workers is the ability to plan and manage visits between children in placement and their biological parents (Kessler, 1999). Organized visits are so critical to the effort to reunite families that PL 96-272 explicitly requires their inclusion in family preservation efforts. Carefully planned executed visits provide the basis for: maintaining and improving family relationships, allowing professionals to assess and intervene in critical areas where parenting may be deficient, formulating recommendations to judicial authorities regarding parental fitness, and enlisting the support and cooperation of foster

parents. Furthermore, visits may expand over time both in duration and frequency so that reunification is achieved in a seamless, un-abrupt fashion. In short, a series of professionally managed, goal-directed visits is the cornerstone of any plan either to reunite the family or to determine that reunification is contradicted (Stein, 1991).

Studies of children returned from foster care and followed for as little as one and one-half years have demonstrated recidivism rates ranging to 35% (Turner, 1994). The alarmingly high failure rate of reunification demands that additional attention be paid to this problem. The importance of supporting the relationships between children in foster care and their parents has frequently been noted in child welfare literature. For the vast majority of children in foster care, their permanency plan is family reunification. Parent visits, i.e. “scheduled, face-to-face contacts between parents and their children” in foster care are considered the primary intervention for maintaining and supporting the development of reunification (Hess & Proch, 1993). A records review of the foster care system was conducted in the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region in Kentucky to see if there is a relationship between the number and types of visits and reunification rates among children in foster care and their birth parents.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

While relatively little has been written in the literature of social work about visits between birth parents and their children in foster care, it is a topic of interest to those who work in the social work field because social workers increasingly recognize the significance of reunification to the establishment of visits early in placement (Haight, 2001). Almost all of the studies have several implications for social work practice and focus on how social workers may better support parents to make visits less stressful and more productive (Haight, 2001). Existing empirical research suggests that, too often,

visits fall short of meeting their critical goals. Even in the most supportive contexts, visiting can be emotionally intense and problematic (Hess & Proch, 1993). Because early attachment relationships undergo considerable development during the first several years of life (Berliner, 1993), they are uniquely vulnerable to disruption through foster care placement.

A significant factor related to visits is the environment in which the visit takes place. Recent studies underscore the importance of visiting in an emotionally supportive and enriched environment (Haight, 2001). In reality, the contexts in which visits occur vary widely. For example, some studies show that mothers visited their young children in a caseworker's office. The research done by Haight (2001) supports that it is unlikely for positive parenting to be demonstrated in more stressful, less optimal visiting contexts. Second, given the wide range of complex maternal and child responses to visiting, it is clear that individualized visit plans are essential. According to Haight (2001), “Cookie Cutter” visit plans are inadequate and may even be harmful. Different families require different types of support if visits are to meet their goals of maintaining and developing adequate parent-child relationships and enhancing well being. On the other hand, continued contact, in the absence of active clinical support during visits, may be harmful to the relationship and well being of birth parents and their children (Haight, 2001). The data suggests that greater frequency of visits between children in care and their birth parents results in a higher reunification rate (Kessler, 1999). The more often visits occur the better the child and parent stay connected and see that each other are safe. Visits also show the child that the parent is making an effort to get them back home. The social worker is able to get a better idea of things the parent needs to work on to get their children back. Visits also help the worker identify situations that will not promote

family reunification, i.e., parent consistently not showing up for visits and inappropriate behavior, like abuse, during visits which does not promote a healthy parent child relationship (Kessler, 1999). Conflicts associated with visits are also noted: the conflict of loyalties when the child feels caught between two families and the competition between the foster and biological parents; and the pain, anger, and humiliation parents feel about the loss of their child and about the visiting plan (Fanshel, 1992).

The literature on visits focuses on their part in family reunification plans, with discussions on the merits of current commitments to preserve and reunify families (Berliner, 1993). The fact that a parent attends visits is often taken as a sign of a strong bond between the parent and child and overrated in the agency's and judge's efforts to effect reunification (Simms, 1991).

Social work practice literature recognizes the centrality of visits in maintaining family ties, and indicates that reunification rates are closely tied to frequency of visits between parents and their children in placement (Fanshel, 1992). It is incumbent upon social service agencies, therefore, to adopt an ecological, "multifaceted interceptive approach to children and their families in the context of their real-life situation and environment" (Fanshel, 1992). Visiting supports families coping with changes in relationships, reassures the child about the parent's well-being, helps the child deal with reality, empowers parents and allows them to practice new behaviors, facilitates transitions to new living arrangements, and affords staff opportunities to observe and assess parental capacity accurately (Hess & Proch, 1993).

The success of early visits is often the best indicator of likely outcomes in family reunification cases. The experience for the family and the prognosis for the case can be improved through realistic appraisals of limitations in nurturance and interaction. The

formulation of concrete plans involving safety, pleasurable and highly structured activity in a neutral safe setting, and sufficient attention to the detail and content of the visit.

Where this is not sufficient to effect reunification, both the case worker and the family will at least know that reasonable and realistic efforts were genuinely made (Loar, 1998).

In the study being conducted with the children in foster care in the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region a records review was conducted to see if the frequency of visits are related to reunification of children placed in out-of-home care.

## **METHODS**

A study was conducted to see if there is a relationship between the number and type of visits between a birth parent and a child in foster care and the rate of reunification and or permanency for the child. Data was collected by using information obtained while completing the Kentucky Foster Care Census, by using TWIST case records, and with the TWS-W058 Children in Placement Management Report, which is produced every Monday. The study was only carried out in the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region, this involved the records of approximately 107 children in out-of-home care and approximately 50 foster families. Each visit that takes place between a child and their family of origin is recorded in the TWIST running record of the case. The frequency of the visits will also be recorded in the foster care census survey. Several variables will be looked at during data collection. The age, sex, and race of the child were variables along with the number of months in care and the child's status at follow-up i.e. reunification, adoption, or planned permanency.

The subjects for the research project were children that are committed to the state of Kentucky's foster care system. As the researcher is a state employee, the data was accessible to collect. A confidentiality agreement is required to be signed by all state

employees agreeing to keep all records confidential, a copy of the agreement is included in the appendix. I.D. numbers was used to identify the children. A master list exists to match a child's I.D. number to their name, but will also remain confidential. Foster parents that participate in the Foster Care Census was given an informed consent form to let them know the purpose of the census and to let them know that participation is voluntary. One was signed by each parent before participation took place. The foster parents were assigned I.D. numbers so that their names and responses may be kept confidential.

An Exemption Certification Form was filled out to fulfill the requirement of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The research project was approved by the Service Region Administrative Associate of the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region and a Cabinet IRB was also approved. A copy of the approval letter is included in the appendix. The study is designed to evaluate the public benefit of the services provided by visits. The study will also be used to make possible changes or alternatives to the program or the procedures surrounding visitation, therefore, qualifying for an exemption. Existing data was collected and the data was recorded in such a manner that the individuals will only be identified by the I.D. numbers that are given to them.

The data collected was analyzed by entering it into a statistical data collection program to see if the results show that the variables affect the permanency goal of children placed in foster care. A copy of the instruments used along with the explanatory letter and informed consent form will be included in the appendix section of the research proposal paper.

## **DISCUSSION**

After completing the research and data collection process the data was analyzed to find out if the race, gender, county the children are from, and the frequency of visits play a significant role in the permanency of children in foster care. The results of the study was presented to the Regional Staff of the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region. Permanency for children in out-of-home care is a very important goal of the Cabinet for Families and Children to meet Federal ASFA guidelines. If certain guidelines are not met then the state of Kentucky will lose major Federal funding. Permanency for children is a very pertinent and pending issue with the state and more specifically with the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region. The results of the study were used to implement the best social work practice when it comes to visits between birth parents and their children. The frequency of visits and the relationship between birth parents and foster parents are key factors in successful visits, which lead to permanency for children.

In an effort to combat foster care drift and help facilitate permanency for children, Congress passed The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272). The Act considered the biological family to be the best place for children and mandated that families be strengthened through services to prevent out-of-home placement and when placement is necessary, that families be reunified as quickly as possible. The law further stated that child welfare agencies must make reasonable efforts to keep families together. When placement with the child's biological parents was not an option, adoption as a permanent placement was considered the next best alternative. This study applies to this law, as it looked to see if reasonable efforts are being made through the quality of visits offered to children and their birth parents. It also looked at how long it takes to achieve permanency for children in care in the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region, which will hopefully give social work implications to see if these children are growing up



in foster care and falling into the foster care drift category. Adoption is also a key factor in the permanency goal for many children. The study tracked each child to see if they are unable to be reunited with their birth families and if adoption was used as the next best alternative.

A limitation of this study is that a lot of the information was pulled from the TWIST system, which is entered by individual caseworkers that may have entered the data incorrectly. All of the most current data may not be up to date in the TWIST system so a child's worker had to be contacted to gather the needed information in some cases. If more resources would have been available I would like to have looked to see if the turnover rate of social workers affected the permanency goals of children in care, but the resources to gain this information is not available to me as a worker.

Children usually enter the child welfare system as a result of abuse or neglect by their caregivers. When children are thought to be at risk of further abuse by those caregivers they are placed in out-of-home care such as foster homes. Studies suggest that once children enter the system they often stay in the system for lengthy periods of time (Simms, 1991). This study gives some pertinent information to the importance of the frequency of visits as they apply to the reunification rate and permanency goals of children in care.

## **RESULTS**

The results of the study were found by using frequency tables and cross-tabs. The frequency tables showed that out of 107 children in care 65.4 percent or 70 females and 34.6 percent or 37 males were placed in out-of-home care in the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region. The frequency table showed that Robertson County had the most children in foster care during the six-month study. The tables also showed that the majority or 89.7

percent of the children in care were Caucasian and the number of visits that children had with their birth parents ranged from 0 to 3 per week.

During the six-month study the placement status of each child was recorded every month. According to the frequency tables after one month all 107 children remained in foster care. During the second month 4.7 percent achieved adoption while the other 95.3 percent remained in foster care. In the third month four children were returned to their parent while 98 children remained in care. During the fourth month only 1 child was adopted and 1 child was reunified with their parents while the rest were still in out-of-home care. In month five all children remained in foster care, but during the sixth and final month of the study 1 child was adopted, 3 children were returned to parents, 2 children turned 18 and were emancipated, while 89 children remained in care.

After completing the frequency tables I decided to complete cross-tabs to see if the gender, race, number of weekly visits, or the county the children were from had any bearing on their permanency goal. The results of the gender cross-tab showed that after six months 2.9 percent of males were adopted, 5.9 percent were returned to their parent, 88.2 percent were still in foster care and 2.9 percent were emancipated. When comparing females the results showed that 0 females were adopted, 1.6 percent were returned to their parent, 96.7 percent were in foster care, and 1.6 percent were emancipated. Since the total number of females in out-of-home care is higher than males, I found it interesting that a higher percentage of males achieved their permanency goal quicker than did females.

According to the race cross-tab all of the African-American and/or the other unidentified race remained in foster care while a percentage of Caucasian children achieved permanency. This result may be because of the difference of the total number of

Caucasian children in care are 84 while the total of African-American and/or other races account for only 10 children.

In looking at progress made with each county during the six-month study the cross-tab showed most counties still had the majority of their children still placed in foster care. Robertson County did have the highest number of children achieving permanency with 1 child being adopted and 1 child being returned home within the six-month time frame of the study. This may have resulted in higher number since Robertson County has the most children committed to foster care. The number of children Robertson County has achieving permanency is not drastically high. Bracken, Mason, and Morgan Counties also had numbers close to that of Robertson County (see attached cross-tab).

The last cross-tab completed was the progress made towards permanency after six-months and the number of weekly visits between children and their birth parents. The cross-tab showed that 2 or more visits per week had a higher rate of permanency for children in care (see attached cross-tab).

The age that children entered care was also calculated. The calculations showed that the majority of the children in the Gateway/Buffalo Trace Region entered care in their teenage years.

## References

- Adoption Assistance Act of 1980, Pub.L.No. 96-272
- Berliner, L. (1993). Is family preservation in the best interest of the children? *Journal Of Interpersonal Violence*, 8, 556-557.
- Fanshel, D. (1992). *Children in foster care: A longitudinal investigation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gean, M.P. (1995). Infants and toddlers in supervised custody: A pilot study of visitation. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24, 608-612.
- Haight, W. (2001). Parent-child interaction during foster care visits. *Social Work*, 46, 325-339.
- Hess, P., & Proch, K. (1993). *Visiting: The heart of reunification*. Washington DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- Jenkins, S. (1995). *Beyond placement: A mother's view of foster care*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kessler, M. (1999). Behavior analysis in child welfare: Competency training caseworkers to manage visits between parents and their children in foster care. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 9, 148-171.
- Loar, L. (1998). Making visits work. *Child Welfare*, 77, 41-59.
- Simms, M. (1991). The family reunification project: Facilitation regular contact among foster children, biological families, and foster families. *Child Welfare*, 70, 679-690.
- Stein, T. (1991). *Children in foster homes: Achieving continuity of care*. New York: Praeger.
- Turner, J. (1994). Reuniting children in foster care with their biological parents. *Social Work*, 29, 501-505.
- Walker, C.W. (1991). Persistence of mourning the foster child as related to the foster Mother's level of maturity. *Social Work*, 61, 173-246.
- Weinstein, E. (1990). *The self-image of the foster child*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.